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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001136

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SUBJECT: TURKISH PARLIAMENT ELECTS PM LOYALIST AS SPEAKER

REF: ANKARA 1015

Classified By: Acting DCM Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4 (b,c)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) elected Mehmet Ali Sahin, a former Minister of Justice and a close ally of PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as its speaker August 15. Sahin's legal and ministerial experience will contribute to ushering the government's ambitious Kurdish initiative through the TGNA and his closeness with Erdogan will ensure that the PM will have continual control over the process. Sahin's election to one of Turkey's most prominent positions also shifts the balance of power within AKP toward Erdogan and away from President Gul, whose followers gained in influence in a cabinet shuffle in April. Sahin is not viewed favorably by the opposition; they see him as a religious conservative, a tool of Erdogan's bidding, and perhaps corrupt in contrast to his predecessor, the cosmopolitan, consensus-building Koksall Toptan. Without opposition cooperation, overarching social reforms on the scale of the Kurdish initiative, will be problematic. Sahin's term will last until the next general elections which must take place in 2011 at the latest. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) The TGNA returned from recess on August 4 to choose a new speaker, who will serve until the next assembly elections scheduled at the latest for 2011. Prime Minister Erdogan made it clear in the weeks before the election that he would prefer a candidate other than the incumbent, Koksall Toptan, to run for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), despite signals from the opposition that Toptan would receive wide support. The party eventually put forward Mehmet Ali Sahin, who served as State Minister and Deputy Prime Minister from 2002-2007 and as Justice Minister from 2007-2000. Erdogan and Sahin have a long history of working together -- Sahin worked for the Istanbul municipality as a lawyer, and then as mayor of Istanbul's Fatih district, while Erdogan was mayor of greater Istanbul in the 1990s. Erdogan's preference for Sahin in the speaker's position is therefore being interpreted in the press as placing a trusted lieutenant in a key post in advance of undertaking heavy legislative lifting over the next two years.

13. (C) AKP's 338 seats in the TGNA guaranteed Sahin's election if the party remained united. This became a forgone conclusion when Toptan gracefully bowed out of contention on August 3. The first two rounds of voting require a two-thirds majority to produce a winner, a number Koksall Toptan would have claimed easily with opposition support. Sahin's nomination prompted most of the opposition parties to

nominate their own candidates and then vote on party lines, preventing an early AKP victory. The third and fourth rounds, however, mandate only a simple majority to produce a winner; Sahin won in the third round with exactly 338 votes.

¶4. (C) As Speaker, Sahin will have the helm for the government's efforts to steer reforms through the TGNA. The 2009-2010 Assembly session will handle a number of ambitious projects, foremost among them being the government's Kurdish initiative, designed to reintegrate dissatisfied Kurds into the Turkish state. Although the details of this plan have not yet been released by the government, there is a general understanding that part of the program will involve wide-ranging democratic, legal, and economic reforms. Sahin is also likely to guide the passage of other laws, possibly including education reform (to allow for the reopening of Halki seminary), the restructuring of Turkey's counterterrorism structure, and other efforts tied to Turkey's EU accession bid. Sahin's close relationship with Erdogan may serve as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it will ensure that the issues the Prime Ministry cares most about will be given priority. On the other, it will give Erdogan an opportunity to micromanage legislation, which could lead to poor judgment and fiery displays of Erdogan's trademark machismo.

¶5. (C) Sahin's election to the speakership is also meaningful from the point of view of AKP's internal politics. Many journalists and political observers saw April's cabinet reshuffle as having been a check on Erdogan's power. The argument runs that a largely pro-Erdogan cabinet failed to

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perform well enough to produce a definitive success at national local elections in late March. The shuffle brought several politicians close to President Gul into the cabinet or to more prominent positions, at the expense of Erdogan supporters. Combined with the resignations from the AKP administration of both Saban Disli and Dengir Mir Mehmet Firat -- two close Erdogan advisors -- because of corruption allegations concerning illegal fundraising via the Germany-based Deniz Feneri charity, Erdogan's camp was on the decline. Sahin claiming the second-highest post in the protocol line shifts the balance back toward Erdogan. Deniz Feneri is unlikely to go away, however, and Sahin himself may be pulled into it. Opposition parties allege that Sahin wrongly delayed the opening of the case in Turkish courts, which originally began in Germany, and suggest that part of the reason is that he, too, may be implicated by evidence in the case.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Sahin's election has both positive and negative implications. The good news is that Erdogan is focused on legislation, and AKP's stagnant reform agenda is back on the front burner. The reforms that are reportedly in line -- Kurds, counterterrorism, and the EU -- are all issues that we have been urging Ankara to undertake for years. The overall trajectory for Turkish democracy and governance is therefore a positive one. The AKP also remained cohesive despite internal debate as to who should be the next speaker.

A solid AKP in this election suggests the potential for similar party solidarity in votes on controversial laws, particularly those related to mainstreaming the Kurds. The bad news, however, is that the parliamentary year is off to a contentious start. AKP may have enough votes in Parliament to pass laws, but AKP cannot change the constitution without the help of one of the larger opposition parties. The opposition, having had its offer to support Toptan rebuffed, will be primed for conflict. Both the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) refused to meet with Sahin before the third round of voting. Without opposition cooperation on reforms, many laws will be referred to the Constitutional Court for review, slowing down the implementation and potentially forcing the government to continually revisit issues. Further, if the opposition's allegations of corruption against Sahin gain any

traction, censure motions and parliamentary inquiries could contribute to a general clogging of the legislative works. Much will depend on how Erdogan and Sahin handle the first few pieces of legislation in the TGNA. They need to set a cooperative tone, despite already setting off on the wrong foot.

17. (C) BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Sahin was born in Ekincik village of Karabuk province in 1950. He served as RP's chairman for the Istanbul subprovince of Eminonu, and then became Deputy Provincial Chairman when Erdogan became the party's Istanbul Provincial Chairman. Sahin was first elected to the TGNA in 1995 on the Welfare ticket representing Istanbul. Sahin and current Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Cicek worked together to defend RP (unsuccessfully) in its closure case. Sahin joined the Virtue Party (FP) alongside his former RP compatriots. When FP split in 2001, Sahin accompanied Erdogan and Gul in founding the AKP.

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